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COLONEL CHARLES WHITTLESEY AND CLEVELAND'S FORGOTTEN HILLTOP FORTS

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The well-dressed field geologist. Charles Whittlesey prepared to attack the geological problems of the Lake Superior copper district. *photo from Western Reserve Historical Society.*

THE CUYAHOGA VALLEY was early recognized as one of the richest archeological regions in Ohio and remains such today, despite the incalculable damage wrought by industrial expansion and urbanization. Unfortunately, the area has also suffered from neglect by the professional archeologist, no genuine survey of the Valley's archeological potential having been made since 1869.

That pioneer survey — and in one way or another all archeological work done in the Cleveland area since that time — centers around Charles Whittlesey, a notable Cleveland lawyer who found time to become even more outstanding in geology and archeology than he was at the bar. As early as 1838 Whittlesey had begun careful surveying and mapping of the Valley's mysterious hilltop forts as well as other of Ohio's earthworks, his maps forming a significant

portion of Squier and Davis' classic "Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley," the initial volume of the Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge. Whittlesey, though plagued by ill health, spent over thirty years exploring the earthworks along the Cuyahoga River and produced in 1871 his "Ancient Earth Forts of the Cuyahoga Valley, Ohio," publishing the comprehensive work himself under the auspices of the young Western Reserve Historical Society of which he was president. During those three decades Whittlesey also had found time to serve on the first Ohio Geological Survey, do considerable prospecting in the Lake Superior copper region, work on David Dale Owen's pioneer exploration of the geology of Wisconsin, and fight two years during the Civil War. Illness forced him to resign after the battle of Shiloh.

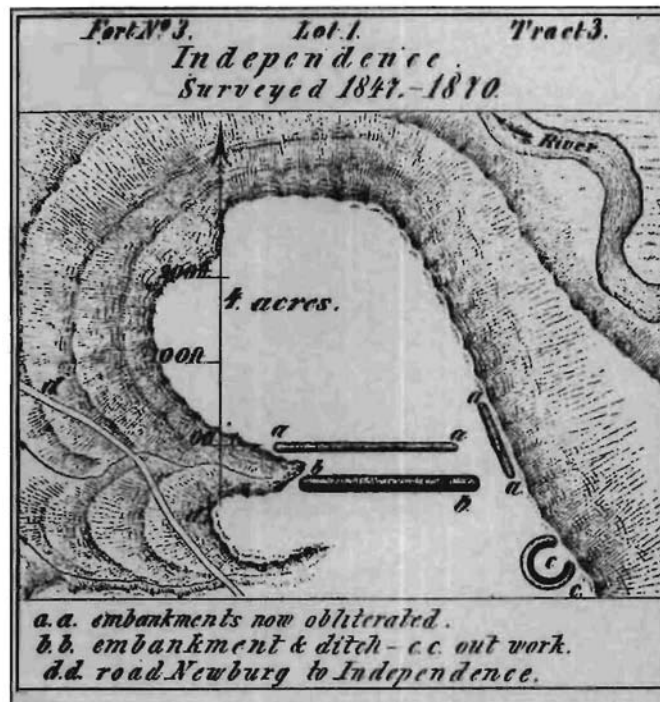
Colonel Whittlesey tested his speculations about the Cuyahoga's hilltop fortifications by only limited excavations, not a particularly unfortunate fact in view of the crudeness of his technique, which was typical of the day. The major importance of his work was the accurate mapping and description of the many sites along the Cuyahoga from Cleveland to Akron. Whittlesey was actually very reluctant to speculate upon the origin of the earthworks, though he did put forth two intriguing suggestions, both ignored by subsequent archeologists. Finding numerous pits within some of these earthen enclosures, pits devoid of potsherds or other refuse, Whittlesey suggested that they were the remnants of aboriginal pithouses. He could not have been further from the truth, for the structures are not man-made but simply the result of slumping of glacial till and lake sediments on which the earth enclosures were built. Ironically, it was Whittlesey who first noted the occurrence in Ohio of glacial kettle holes — depressions created by the melting of relict patches of glacial ice — the irony lying in the fact that some of Whittlesey's "pithouses" may actually be kettle holes.

Whittlesey's other hypothesis, that more than one group of Indians occupied these hilltop forts at different times has also been given short shrift by most archeologists, but with far less justification. Half a century after Whittlesey's work, Emerson F. Greenman, of the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society, examined portions of the hilltop forts at South Park and Tuttle Hill near Independence but did not realize that the sites had been occupied by distinct groups of people at widely separated intervals in time. Together with excavations at similar forts on the Ashtabula, Conneaut, Grand, Chagrin, and Vermilion Rivers, the work at South Park and Tuttle Hill formed the basis for Greenman's "Whittlesey Focus," a cultural unit which archeologists now believe to be identical with the historic and protohistoric Erie Indians. Named in honor of Whittlesey, the concept of the Whittlesey Focus nonetheless violates Whittlesey's idea that the hilltop fortifications were occupied by more than one group of people at different times, and archeologists ever since Greenman have accepted as axiomatic the idea that the Eries or proto-Eries built the hilltop forts of the Cuyahoga, even though Greenman himself was reluctant to accept the identification without more evidence.

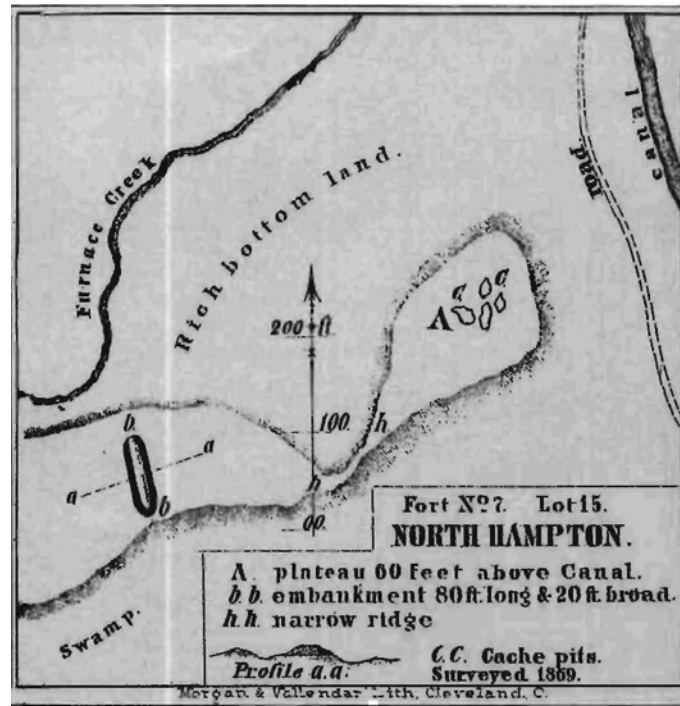
The Natural Science Museum's 1967 excavation at Indian Point, a typical hilltop fort near Painesville on the Grand River, has provided the first radiocarbon date on a northern Ohio hilltop fort. Examination of the pottery and flint point types found within the earthwork and the date — 2090 B.C. — support Colonel Whittlesey's assumption. Apparently the earthen fortifications were built by Early Woodland people at least 3000 years before the same sites were reoccupied by the later Whittlesey people. Supporting evidence comes from exploration of the Leimbach Site, a similar hilltop fort on the Vermilion River, excavated by Dr. Orrin Shane, Kent State University. These Early Woodland people were related to members of the early mound-building Adena Phase of southern Ohio, though Adena-type burial mounds are extremely rare in northern Ohio. Further evidence substantiating Whittlesey's hypothesis is the fact that many of the hilltop

forts do not reveal Whittlesey Focus artifacts. The paucity of artifact material on some of the sites, such as the Waite Hill fort near Willoughby, suggests that the original builders used the forts only as places of refuge and that not all of the hilltop forts were later occupied by the Whittlesey people.

Colonel Whittlesey's survey of the Cuyahoga Valley, as ambitious as it was, could not help but miss some important archeological sites. As he himself wrote, "It is possible that all the old earth works of this valley are not yet discovered. They are even in an undisturbed condition, not very prominent, the embankments seldom exceeding three feet in height, with a ditch of equal depth. In old fields that have been under cultivation twenty-five to forty years, none but a practiced eye would detect them. Fifty years since this country was but little settled; most of it being then covered with a heavy forest. When the old forts were from time to time discovered they attracted little attention."



Whittlesey's map of the Tuttle Hill earthworks, all of which have been destroyed.
Western Reserve Historical Society.



Whittlesey's map of the Furnace Run earthwork, south of Peninsula, Ohio.
Western Reserve Historical Society.

Most sites missed or omitted from his report were not included because they did not have earthworks associated with them, but the South Park site near Independence is an important exception for it seems to have had an earthen embankment separating the major occupation area from the rest of the high ridge on which the site lies. The Carey Farm site, now largely destroyed by gravel operations, and the Doubler site are both important Whittlesey components which went unnoted by Whittlesey.

In an effort to delineate the exact nature of Greenman's Whittlesey Focus, the Natural Science Museum has initiated an excavation program centering around known Whittlesey sites. The 1967 season included excavation of two Lake County Whittlesey sites, Fairport Harbor and Indian Point, and this past summer has seen the beginning of reinvestigation of the important South Park site, the best preserved of the four components which formed the nucleus of Greenman's concept. The nearby site of Tuttle Hill has been completely destroyed and is now the site of an industrial complex. South Park, though also owned by a manufacturing company, has met a happier fate, having been sealed off from trespassers for many years. When the material recovered by the Museum this past summer is analyzed and the information considered in relation to radiocarbon dates from the site, it is anticipated that we will have at last the beginnings of a chronological framework for the Whittlesey Focus, a temporal scale which will allow us to better appreciate the nature of the earthworks which, though less mysterious, are just as fascinating today as they were to Colonel Whittlesey.

It is remarkable that these earthworks, forgotten by archeologist and public alike, have not all disappeared. Many are gone, deliberately plowed away by farmers, carted away for

garden soil, or simply covered with buildings. But Cleveland's expanding park system, which has grown with the city, incorporates a classic example of the hilltop fort, located at Little Cedar Point in Rocky River Reservation. Here, a large isolated hill of Cleveland Shale, also noteworthy for having yielded many fossil fish, was utilized by the aborigines as a natural fortification. A three-walled earthwork is still visible at the northern end of the hill. The scarcity of artifact material from the site suggests that it was not occupied by the later Whittlesey Focus people, though only careful excavation would settle the point. Whittlesey, if he knew about this fort, did not include it in his survey, which was restricted to the Cuyahoga Valley, but another geologist-archeologist, M. C. Read, mapped this site in the 1870's. The Rocky River fort remains the best preserved hilltop fort in the immediate Cleveland area, all of those described by Whittlesey having been destroyed or damaged to some degree by agriculture, industrialization and urbanization, or amateur archeologists.

Colonel Whittlesey did little archeological work after publication of his "Ancient Earthworks," partly because of increasingly poor health and partly because of increased geological work. In particular he was preoccupied with his iron and coal lands in the Hocking Valley region, having been one of the first to realize the economic importance of the iron ores of the Hocking-Perry County district. Law and an interest in local history as well as consulting work in geology also drew him away from archeology, as evidenced by a voluminous correspondence (preserved in the Western Reserve Historical Society) including such notables as Francis Parkman and John Wesley Powell. However, he still found time to correspond with such archeologists as Read and C. C. Abbott, his interest in the much debated question of pre-glacial man in Ohio remaining strong until the end. His ever-precarious health giving way completely, his death finally came in 1886.

Student assistant examines partly excavated refuse pit at South Park site. Pit yielded a nearly complete pottery vessel.



Whittlesey, despite his limited publications, remains one of the major pioneer archeologists of Ohio, ranking high above the typical relic collector with which the state has been too often cursed. His "Ancient Earth Forts" and other publications remain his most enduring monument, but an even more fitting one would be permanent preservation of the earthworks which he described. Such an idea could yet come about if plans for the proposed park system along the Cuyahoga River materialize, for several of Whittlesey's ancient earth forts adjoin the projected park area. In particular, the small but well-preserved fortification at the mouth of Furnace Run, just south of Peninsula, Ohio, would make an ideal focal point for the proposed park area; others still exist immediately north of Peninsula, in the vicinity of Boston, and could probably be included in the park with relative ease. Certainly some effort should be made to preserve and study these ancient monuments before they vanish as completely as did their builders.

Paleontologist Peter Bungart inspects the Rocky River fortification, taking a brief respite from fossil fish collecting. *photo from Case Western Reserve University, Geology Department.*

